

TITLES: dull vs. dashing first words

If you can't get your reader beyond your title or to finish your introduction, you can't persuade them of anything. The purpose of an essay, after all, is *to persuade*, so you want to do your best to get your reader's attention—this begins with the title. Some writers come up with their title first; others wait until the paper is finished to decide on the title. Some titles come to mind in the middle of writing the paper. It doesn't matter when it comes to you, you just want your title to be a good one.

Features of Good Titles

- Good titles suggest or state the point of an essay
- Good titles are concise but informative
- Good titles catch readers' attention
- Good titles stir thought, often raising small questions for readers such as "How can that be?"

Some Examples

- "The Mosaic vs. the Myth"
 - suggests the point of the essay: a contrast of these two ideas about the cultural makeup of the U.S.
 - concise but informative: you know the essay will be about, and what it will compare
 - this is an often-talked about subject in the U.S., so the reader is likely to be interested
 - causes the reader to wonder what the author will say about this debate—creates a question in the reader's mind
- "Stop the Clock"—why stop it?
- "Freedom from Choice"—freedom *from* choice? Why?
- "If I Told You...Would You Want to Hear?"—hear what?

Strategies for Coming Up with a Title

Use a contrast of some kind—for example, an essay in Newsweek was titled "A Day On." This title contrasts the idea of having a day *off* (from work, school, etc.) The essay suggested that "Instead of a day off, perhaps it should be a day on, a day devoted, across the nation, to helping out—a day, in fact, of national service." Other contrast-type titles include "Study Hard and You, Too, Can Deliver Pizza," "A Convenient Truth," and "A Woman Who is Man Enough."

Use three words for a title—Consider "Stop the Clock," "Freedom from Choice," "A Day On," "The Tense Middle," "Hooked on Violence," "Eating for Credit," etc. Threes are a common pattern in English, and readers look for them and are delighted by them because they create rhythm; three words satisfy the mind.

Use your thesis as your title—William Safire titles an essay "Character is Destiny" because it is about how character shapes our nation, and thus, our future.

Use a question as your title—"What is the Value of Algebra?" "Why Aren't We Shocked?" "If I Told You...Would You Want to Hear?" Using a question suggests that you will answer it (and you should) in the essay.

Use alliteration or word play in your title—alliteration is the repetition of consonant sounds. For example, "Stem Cells: The Hope and the Hype." You can also play with words—for example, "The War of the Words" plays off of the title of the book (and movie) The War of the Worlds. Another example is "The Politics of Pot"—politics, a very serious matter, and pot, and illegal drug, and not often placed alongside one another.

Titles to Avoid

- Avoid general, boring titles such as "An Interesting Problem" or "School and Work"
- Avoid renaming assignments such as "Essay #1" or "Persuasive Essay" or "Reading Response Essay"
- Avoid titles that strain for effect like "Suppose you were a Moustache Hair"